

Bureau of Land Management
Northeast California Resource Advisory Council
Business Meeting
June 11, 2013, Weaverville, California

Summary Minutes

The meeting convened at 1 p.m. at the Weaverville Veterans' Memorial Building. Chairman Skip Willmore presided.

Attending

Category one: Todd Swickard, Skip Willmore, Russ Hawkins. Absent: John Erquiaga, Ken McGarva.

Category Two: Frank Bayham, Louise Jensen, Gale Dupree. Absent: Alan Cain, Judy Oliver.

Category Three: Sean Curtis, Brad Hanson, Carol Montgomery. Absent: Rich DuVarney, Jim Chapman.

There is a quorum.

BLM Staff: District Manager Nancy Haug, Eagle Lake Field Manager Ken Collum, Alturas-Surprise Field Manager Tim Burke, Redding Field Manager Jennifer Mata, Public Affairs Officer Jeff Fontana.

Guests (via conference phone): Debbie Coffey, Carla Bowers, Sherry Oster.

Opening Business

Approvals: The agenda was approved. The minutes from the last meeting were approved.

Election of Officers: The group elected Skip Willmore chairman and Sean Curtis vice chair.

Sage Grouse Conservation

Nancy Haug summarized the status of the BLM work to update resource management plans to include regulatory mechanisms for sage grouse conservation:

Chapters 1,2, and 3 of the EIS have been sent to the cooperating agencies for review and comment.

The deadline for release of the public draft is late September.
The question now is how the RAC wants to be involved in the draft EIS.

There was clarifying discussion about the processes and the opportunities for RAC review and involvement. Nancy explained the regional and subregional organization the BLM is following, and how the northeast California field offices fit into the process. She suggested that the RAC might want to consider developing a recommendation on the preferred alternative for the subregion – Nevada and Northeast California.

There is not a provision for early review by the RACs. Only the cooperating agencies review the administrative draft materials. For Northeast California, cooperative agencies are Modoc and Lassen counties, and the California and Nevada state departments of wildlife.

Sean Curtis suggested the RAC could adopt the same model used to comment on the BLM's wild horse and burro program management recommendations. A subcommittee developed recommendations for the full RAC.

Ken Collum suggested that a recommendation could be considering selecting an alternative

Todd Swickard and Sean support the subcommittee approach -- meetings of the subcommittee and a meeting of the full RAC.

Skip questioned the effect of the current effort on the sage grouse measures contained in the existing northeast California RMPs. Nancy responded that the RMPs, adopted in 2008, are in relatively good shape, but there is new data that has been developed since RMP approvals that must be considered in the effort to strengthen regulatory measures to conserve sage-grouse and their habitat.

Action: The RAC formed a subcommittee to review the document and set meeting dates for the subcommittee to develop a proposed recommendation for consideration by the full RAC. Meeting dates are Nov. 12 for the subcommittee, and Dec. 4 for the full board. Meetings are at the Eagle Lake Field Office in Susanville.

Subcommittee members:

Category one: Todd Swickard

Category two: Gale Dupree

Category three: Sean Curtis

Chairman Skip Willmore

There was continuing discussion about the most effective way to review the document.

Drought

Field Managers Ken Collum and Tim Burke reported:

Eagle Lake: Ken noted that the field office considers livestock grazing adjustments due to drought on a permit-by-permit basis. Staff members monitor conditions continuously and continue discussions with grazing permit holders.

Alturas/Surprise: Tim reported the Surprise and Alturas field offices have a drought policy developed by this RAC. It requires that if precipitation is under 75 percent of average, a drought watch is declared. If the low precipitation persists a second year, a drought is declared and livestock use is reduced by a percentage equal to the precipitation percentage deficit.

Currently, all reporting areas in Surprise are over 75 percent of normal and out of a declared drought. For Alturas Field Office lands, two areas are in declared drought: Tule Lake and Canby areas are both at about 70 percent of average, and shortened grazing seasons or reduced livestock authorizations are in place.

Tim said there was no opportunity for early grazing in the Lost Fire burn this year as hoped.

Fire Recovery

Lost Fire: Tim summarized activities on the Lost Fire that burned 61,000 acres last August.

- 18 grazing decisions were issued, closing the burned area to livestock grazing for two growing seasons to allow for vegetation recovery. Tim summarized a settlement agreement on a livestock trespass issue in the part of the Rush Fire within the Surprise Field Office jurisdiction.
- He said there has been strong coordination with the permittees, and livestock drift into the burned area has been minimal.
- 13 erosion control dams were built in Clover Creek, 10,000 bitterbrush seedlings were planted with assistance from Surprise Valley High School students, 40 miles of allotment pasture fence was rebuilt.
- A project is planned in which the Back Country Horsemen will pack materials into the High Rock Wilderness for reconstructing a wilderness boundary fence. The fencing projects have been done under contract.
- The Surprise and Eagle Lake Field Offices are coordinating on archaeological clearances needed for seeding projects.

- An issue now is difficulties with monitoring because of the ability to hire seasonal employees due to budget sequestration. The monitoring need will be especially critical next year.

Rush Fire: Eagle Lake Field Manager Ken Collum summarized:

- Contracts have been used for fence reconstruction on the 315,000 acres, all in priority sage grouse habitat.
- 8 grazing allotments were affected and burned areas are closed to grazing. All the permittees voluntarily removed livestock last year and will keep them out of the burned area until vegetation recovery objectives are achieved.
- The field office received about \$2.1 million to rehabilitation and
- 2,500 acres were drill seeded with grass and shrubs. 24,000 acres of higher elevations were seeded aerially with sagebrush and native grass.
- Spring has provided some well-timed moisture and there is good grass recovery particularly at higher elevations.
- There has been good volunteer support in bitterbrush planting work.
- The field office received a \$300,000 grant from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to replace guzzlers and build fences at riparian areas to keep livestock and wild horses and burros out of burned areas. The grant also supported bitterbrush planting.
- The field office has contracted with the Great Basin Institute of Reno, which will provide employees to assist with monitoring vegetation recovery in the burned area.

There was continuing discussion about timing of precipitation, sage-grouse lek counts, sage grouse migration, and other topics related to fire recovery.

There was discussion about the events surrounding the fire and the extreme fire conditions.

Frank Bayham encouraged field offices to take advantage of improved "ground visibility" in burned areas to survey for cultural resources.

Field Managers' Reports

Eagle Lake: Ken Collum presented a report covering forestry and fuels, range and weeds, fire impact rehabilitation, wildlife, recreation, ecology and botany, energy development, archaeology and operations at the Litchfield Wild Horse and Burro Corrals

Questions/answers: There was discussion about upcoming wild horse and burro adoptions.

Alturas/Surprise: Field manager Tim Burke reported:

For the Surprise Field Office the report covered the Massacre Lakes Environmental Assessment, Vya Integrated Vegetation Management Planning, development of a supplemental environmental impact statement for the Ruby Pipeline and impacts of budget sequestration.

For the Alturas Field Office, the report included an update on geothermal development in the Glass Mountain Area, the status of proposed PG&E land donations to the field office, and budget sequestration impacts.

There was discussion about the potential transfer of PG&E land to public ownership in the Alturas field Office.

Skip said there will be little public support in the intermountain area for a federal government "takeover" of PG&E lands.

Public Comment

From the phone:

Debbie Coffey: Urged the BLM to give a fair share of rangeland resources to wild horses as conditions improve from wildfire. She noted that the area under the RAC purview is the last in California with wild horses. Horse advocates are "watching what is going on."

Sherry Oster: Questioned how wild horse and burro adoption fees are directed in the federal budget. Jeff will confirm and get back or post information. She discussed a study in Kenya involving donkeys and zebra and suggested that a similar study to determine forage competition between livestock and horses should be considered in wild horse and burro herd management areas.

Carla Bowers: Is interested in updates on wild horses and burros in the fire areas and details on any plans for bait and water trapping, details on the status of horses in the Lost Fire burn, and gather plans for Coppersmith-Buckhorn.

Carla encouraged the RAC to review her proposal for the Massacre Lakes wild horse herd and provide her with feedback. She asked for support of her alternative to preserve the Massacre Lakes herd for scientific research. Her proposal is to study the herd that has not been rounded up (has not been gathered since 1988) to compare herd dynamics with those that are regularly rounded up.

She asked for assistance in developing innovative ideas to allow the Massacre Lakes livestock grazing permittee to find other AUM sources to avoid impacts on the Massacre Lakes wild horse herd.

Member Roundtable

In response to Carla:

-- Ken Collum noted that direct counts in the Twin Peaks HMA in April showed about 1,500 horses, burros and mules. They were widely distributed, but biggest concentrations were in the north Twin Peaks home range. USGS validation of the data is pending. The animals appear to be healthy. Tim Burke noted that no Fox Hog HMA horses have been removed from the Lost Fire area. They are impacting some of the burned area, as are some livestock. The field office has also received landowner requests for removal of horses that are outside of the north and east boundaries of the Carter Reservoir HMA near Cedarville. No removals have been authorized because of limited BLM holding space. Further, he noted that the Coppersmith-Buckhorn HMA gather was proposed in an EA released last year, but the gather was not undertaken due to budget limitations. A final EA has not been issued.

Frank Bayham: Was contacted by someone interested in filming in wild horse territory. He referred them to Ken and Jeff.

Carol Montgomery reported seeing healthy wild horses in Fox Hog over the Memorial Day Weekend.

Louise Jensen: Asked about a request to RAC members to comment on the Massacre Lakes EA. Managers said the RAC will have the opportunity to comment when the EA is released next month.

Skip asked about progress toward meeting objectives of the Sage Steppe Restoration Plan. Tim said the agencies are at the low end of reducing juniper on about 14,000 acres yearly. There was continuing discussion about monitoring effectiveness and adapting as needed.

Carol Montgomery: complimented CA BLM for its efforts via News.bytes and other communication tools. The RAC should be very proud of what California does.

The meeting was adjourned at 5 p.m.